

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

The Red Sari

Kavita Ivy Nandan

Wearing *kurta pyjamas* and tatty jumpers, Hari Punja and Ram Prasad stood at the corner of a row of shops. Their frozen hands moved quickly, dipping into the steel pots and dishing hot *gulab jamuns* into clay containers for the half-dozen people standing about the table constructed from cartons. The steam from the pots rose into the surrounding mist.

Hari unwound the cloth that covered the top of his head. He then wrapped it even more tightly to secure any extra molecule of heat that could be trapped by the thin cotton. His bald head felt as cold as a stone. He smiled to himself. The sweetmeats had turned out especially good today. No doubt they would have many more customers before the day was over. His companion's *gulab jamuns* were almost as good as his, but not quite. This reminder of his own superiority circulated through his body like heat from a dung-burning stove.

Hari glanced at Ram Prasad, noting how his thick coat of hair and plumpness protected him against the cold. The men were not best friends exactly but they shared two important traits: the skill of sweet-making and a perennial restlessness.

When the last customer of the morning had disappeared, the men leant against the wall between 'Best, Cheapest Saris' and 'Subramani Tailors', sharing a *beedi*, grateful for the break before the lunch rush. Ram's eyelids flickered, as if the thought that was forming in his brain lacked sufficient power to reach its destination. He closed his eyes and the idea was sealed within.

'Open wide!' Hari joked.

'Hari, listen,' began Ram.

Hari flicked the *beedi* away and almost leapt into the still warm pot. He tried to force one of his *gulab jamuns* into Ram's mouth with his wiry hands. Surely this would stop Ram from sharing one of his dreamy notions with him, at least for today. He was in a sour mood because his wife had fought with him that morning. She had accused him of using too much of her ghee in his *gulab jamuns*. Stupid woman! Obviously the ghee was why they were so tasty.

Hari grunted. Ram always annoyed him when he started his sentences like that, as if he were privy to the most important secret in the world. He had to admit, though, that Ram had been loyal to him over the years; they had travelled together to sell their sweetmeats, *gulab jamuns*, *barfi*, *jellebi*, in most of the markets of Calcutta.

You might say that their relationship was crisp on the outside but soft in the middle, just like one of Hari's flawless *gulab jamuns*.

Ram continued to talk with the sweetmeat dissolving in his mouth. 'Aren't you bored with coming here day after day and selling sweets? Let's go somewhere else. Start a new life. There's a ship that can take us to the new world – *Phiji*, they call it. All we have to do is turn up at the port.'

Hari was astounded by his friend's insensitivity – typical careless bachelor attitude. What about his wife? Bad-tempered she may be, but she was still his wife. And his house? The mud-like structure was hardly a house to be proud of, but now that his father was no longer there, it was his. At least he wasn't ashamed of his own house, unlike Ram who had never invited Hari once to his home. In a way, he felt sorry for him. Ram had neither wife nor mother to keep a house in good shape.

'The Red Sari.' Kavita Ivy Nandan.

Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

Hari resisted Ram's fantasy about this 'amazing opportunity for adventure' all month. One night the sorrowful image of his mother standing by her dung stove, waiting for him to return home, came to him. But soon, even mother-guilt was insufficient to contain his growing excitement. He was forced to admit that lately he had felt a sense of dissatisfaction about his life. For one thing, he was growing tired of the endless bickering between his wife and mother, and no matter how much dung his mother burnt, the blasted house just wouldn't get warm. He asked Ram to tell him again about this magical ship that would take them to the new world.

Ram sowed seeds of desire for a different existence in Hari's uninspired soul, just like his wife, unbeknown to Hari, squirted drops of condensed milk into his *gulab jamun* mixture.

Ram Prasad and Hari Punja left the Calcutta docks on the ship *Leonidas* for the Fiji Islands at the beginning of 1879. Once during the voyage Hari thought he recognised a distant cousin but he soon forgot him, so overwhelmed was he by thirst, seasickness and the smell of bodies. When they arrived in Levuka on the island of Ovalau in Fiji nearly two months later they were immediately put to labour in the cane fields of the Australian Colonial Sugar Refinery, nine hours a day for five days a week, and five hours on Saturdays. The coolies would return, exhausted and famished, to identical rows of residential barracks that were ten feet by seven feet.

Ram and Hari slotted seamlessly into the indenture machine. Both had been seduced by the idea of a different life, with the promise of freedom and opportunity in a new country. They signed their lives away, or at least five years of indenture, with a thumbprint, two souls out of five hundred bonded labourers transported to the British colony to work on the plantations.

One evening, after six months had passed, Hari sat with hunched shoulders on the mud floor of Ram's hut and asked, 'Did we make a mistake by coming here?'

Ram was silent. The day's work had exhausted him. He had become thin and his large eyes had receded into their sockets. The overseer or sirdar, frustrated about a fight that had broken out earlier between two coolies, had been particularly brutal to him. Ram could not understand why, despite the sirdar being Indian himself, it made no difference to the way he treated them. He stared blurry-eyed at the brass goddess Lakshmi, one of the few items that he had brought with him from India. He kept his other possessions – clothes, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and a copper container for pouring water – neatly in a corner of the hovel. He had been so willing to leave his past behind for the sake of adventure that he had even encouraged Hari to walk away from his home and his family. But how could he have foreseen that they would end up swapping an uneventful life – that now seemed like a sweet dream – for this nightmare? Day in and day out, they planted and harvested the cane, the stalks quickly becoming blades that cut their hands and heart. The beauty of the island lay like a painted frieze beyond the compound where they were living and dying.

A palpable excitement entered the cane fields the following morning. There were rumours that a newly arrived ship, *Syria*, was carrying women – lots of women. In their excitement, the labourers cut the top of the cane too high or the bottom not low enough and received blows from the sirdars for their inattention. Ram's thoughts also began to drift. In India he had had little experience with women and since coming here that little had dwindled to nothing. He knew what he liked, though: women with fair skin, long hair and breasts like melons.

His daydreaming earned him a blow on the shoulder. 'Hey, hero! Dreaming of humpy-humpy sex eh? Son of a bitch, get back to work!' Ram struck the cane again and again, smarting from the sirdar's strike and his vulgar remark.

Where was Hari? Today was the second time in a row that he was late. What had gotten into

him lately? He knew, like all of them, that the penalty for being anywhere but your assigned plantation was severe. To his surprise, he saw Hari scurrying like a mongoose through the lanes of cane to reach him. He had barely managed to escape being sighted by the sirdar, whose bleary *yagona* eyes were darting all around the cane field to catch anything punishable.

‘Ram, Ram! I’ve found a way to make a little more money on the side for us. I’ve been experimenting, and I think I’ve come up with the right recipe.’

So that’s what Hari had been up to, mixing ingredients, at least the ones that were available to them on this savage island. Ram looked at Hari in amazement. Had the despair of this place finally made him stark raving mad? But before he could give his friend a good shake, the two of them were distracted by a line of women walking along a nearby road that led to some empty barracks. Their faces were weary and they carried their bodies defensively, bodies that had been recently deloused, prodded and declared fit for work. The gold nose stud of a woman wearing a red sari who was near the end of the line glinted in the early morning sun. Ram nudged Hari, but after a brief glance his friend continued to blab on about flour, milk, sugar and the humidity ruining his *galub jamuns*.

That afternoon, when Ram stood up to stretch his aching back, he saw a flash of red cloth disappearing into one of the adjacent plots. Something made him follow. He stopped when he saw a woman, her back to him, weeding a lane of cane with a hoe. A red cotton sari was wrapped tightly around her thin body and one end was tucked efficiently into the side of her waist. Her hair was tied in a simple knot, which rested on the nape of her neck. She hoed the cane with the strength of a man but in tune to the song, which she was sweetly singing.

‘Lekha!’ The sirdar yelled her name like an expletive.

Ram wondered if he knew the names of all the new arrivals. He turned and slipped away. He didn’t want to be caught spying by the sirdar, but even less so by the woman. But he found himself slipping away from his gang on a daily basis to observe Lekha. At the end of the work day she would wipe away perspiration with the edge of her red sari, and then balance on her haunches and take hungry, almost desperate, gulps of water from the brass *lota*. He enjoyed watching her unknot and comb her hair and twirl into a circle with her thumb and forefinger any loose strands.

One evening, after the work was done for the day and he had prepared and eaten his meal, Ram went to Hari’s quarters. They drank tea and afterwards smoked tobacco together as they sat on the mud floor, chatting. Hari, still obsessed with making sweets said, ‘we could start by giving the sweetmeats out for free to see if there is a market for them. I think this could work, Ram. Satisfying people’s sweet tooth is a calling, *yaar*.’

It amazed Ram that Hari talked endlessly about *mithai* and very little about his wife. Ram, in turn, talked only of the woman in the red sari. He told Hari about Lekha’s soulful voice, her dark skin, which was so different to what he normally liked, and yet somehow enticing.

Suddenly they heard a scream. It was high-pitched and echoed across the cane fields.

‘Lekha! She’s in trouble, Hari!’ Ram raced outside the barrack and towards the nearest cane plantation. He didn’t hear Hari calling to him to stop; he heard only the voice of his beloved, the woman with whom he had never exchanged a single word, calling for help.

Hari tried to follow him but Ram was too fast and he soon lost him. After a while he stopped running. Ram was behaving like a crazy man. How could he be sure the scream had come from Lekha? He listened but could hear nothing: no screaming, no Ram. The sudden loud clanging of the sugar cane train, the last of the day, as it passed the field made his heart pound furiously.

A figure emerged from the uncut cane. It was the sirdar, with his stick, and he was striding in his direction. Terrified, Hari turned and ran back to his hut.

It was four am, a week later. Hari stood in front of his barracks, waiting for customers. On a makeshift table made from coconut fronds he had placed a tray of *gulab jamuns*. Appetite was hard to come by at this time of the day but he still had hope. He was thinking about his mother. Was she still alive? He was too afraid to think about his wife. The disappointment she must have felt when he never came home. And Ram ... Ram was dead. His body had been found lying in a cane field, the cause of death a single violent blow to the head. And Lekha ... Hari had never seen her again. He heard she had been shifted to another plantation.

‘Three *gulab jamuns*. Give me the plump ones, idiot.’

The first customer of the day. Hari, his hands trembling, placed the three sweets on a palm leaf. He kept his eyes down to avoid looking at the sirdar.

The man sucked and slurped greedily. Then he pulled a cloth from his pocket to wipe his lips and strode off. But not before Hari had seen it: a strip of cloth from the edge of a red sari.

Kavita Ivy Nandan grew up in Fiji and now lives in Canberra. She has a PhD in Literature from the Australian National University and has been a lecturer at the University of Canberra, the University of the South Pacific, Charles Darwin University and the ANU. She has published one novel, *Home After Dark* (2015), and is the editor of *Stolen Words* (2005) and *Requiem for a Rainbow* (2007), and the co-editor of *Writing the Pacific* (2007).